

EDITORIALS

ESA change reasonable

If the scientific review of last year's decision to withhold irrigation water from the Klamath Basin proved anything, it is that science and the federal Endangered Species Act sometimes have little in common. The preliminary report by National Academy of Sciences experts found, you will recall, that the decision to withhold water was not supported by scientific fact.

Had the review been done earlier, what a difference it might have made. The close to \$200 million in economic damage done to the region could have been avoided, for example. Farmers would not have gone broke. Stores would have done the business they'd have done had farmers, their families and their workers been paid. Law enforcement would have been far less severely taxed, for it would not have been put in the position of standing between understandably distraught members of the agricultural community and the federal agents charged with seeing that irrigation headgates remained closed.

Reviewers discovered that the water shutoff was not justified by the available evidence. The algae blooms it was supposed to prevent, for instance, are an historic part of life in the Upper Klamath Lake, in high water years and low. In fact, they found no evidence that supported the claim that withholding irrigation water somehow improved survival chances of the endangered suckerfish that call the lake home.

Congressman Greg Walden, who represents Eastern Oregon, hopes to forestall similar occurrences in the future. He and several others have intro-

duced an amendment to the Endangered Species Act that might, in the face of last summer's Klamath Basin debacle, actually stand a chance of making it through the House of Representatives. Were it to do so, it would bring cold, hard logic to what has frequently been a flimsily supported process since the act was adopted in 1973.

Walden's bill, HR 2829, would require the Secretary of the Interior — who is responsible for listing plants and animals under the act — to give greater weight to scientific evidence in making decisions. The secretary would have to accept data on species gathered by landowners and would have to cooperate fully with the states involved, which is not now the case. No listing, recovery plan or even delisting could be undertaken without review of the evidence by an unbiased panel of three scientists. It could not, in other words, simply be somebody's best guess about a species, the threat to it and its needs, which is what apparently governed decision making in the Klamath Basin last summer. Instead, the act would be grounded more firmly in science, as it should have been all along.

Bills to make changes in the ESA have fared poorly, indeed, in the nearly 30 years since the law was passed. It's just too easy to argue that saving something cute like a spotted owl is worth whatever it takes. Yet all but the most unreasonable of environmental groups surely must accept the notion that science, not emotion, should have a key role in determining how the act is carried out. If that is the case, perhaps HR 2829 itself can lose its endangered status.